Sous Chef

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Sous Chef

by KarcistBurakh

Summary

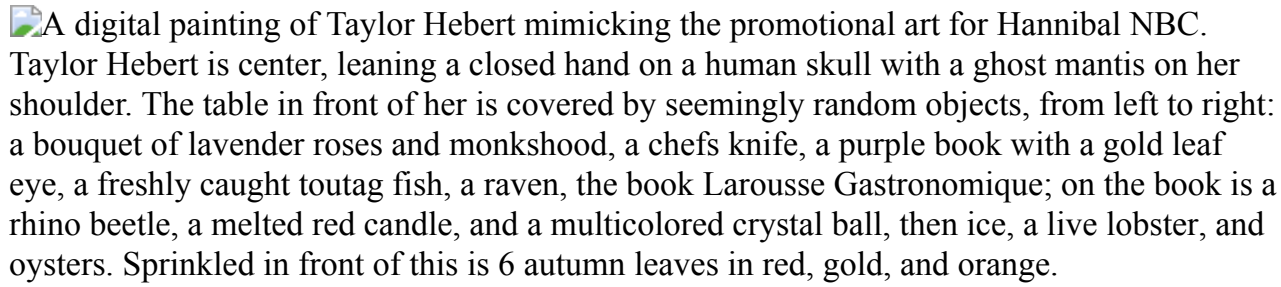
"If you pay attention to the other workers around here you'll notice they watch without staring. They'll let their eyes roam a bit. It helps everyone feel a little more at ease. Not to mention keeping the more unstable patients from thinking you're singling them out."

"Patients like you?"

Cover Art

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes


A digital painting of Taylor Hebert mimicking the promotional art for Hannibal NBC. Taylor Hebert is center, leaning a closed hand on a human skull with a ghost mantis on her shoulder. The table in front of her is covered by seemingly random objects, from left to right: a bouquet of lavender roses and monkshood, a chefs knife, a purple book with a gold leaf eye, a freshly caught toutag fish, a raven, the book Larousse Gastronomique; on the book is a rhino beetle, a melted red candle, and a multicolored crystal ball, then ice, a live lobster, and oysters. Sprinkled in front of this is 6 autumn leaves in red, gold, and orange.

Chapter End Notes

Art by the wonderful Midglings! Thank you so much for bringing this idea to life.

Check them out below,

https://twitter.com/MidglingsArt

Prep Work 1.1

Chapter Notes

> In which we are introduced to our heroine in dire straits, she meets a new face, and takes a ride.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"*... unique among installments for blatantly drawing upon the conventions of Surrealism, including bizarre transformations, the juxtaposition of incongruous images, the distortion of bodies, and unorthodox use of religious symbolism, to aestheticize the...*"

I stopped reading as I heard a short siren blast, and the outer gates to the ward started to cycle open. I tucked in a swatch of toilet paper to mark my spot on the page, but didn't get up. The troublemakers were kept closest to the entrance for ease of access which had the unfortunate side effect of letting them be the first to greet anyone coming in. I closed my eyes and focused on what I could hear over the mounting riot of noise bouncing off the cement blocks that made up the hall. It was difficult, but I could make out three sets of footsteps, one with a hitch in their gait, under-oiled gears, and the rattle of key cards jostling on a ring. So somebody was either getting a visit or lunch was early. Either way it was odd. Stranger yet, the scuffs and creaks stopped outside my cell.

I drew a deep breath in through my nose and let the information flow in freely. A crisp stab of industrial bleach, detergent, and starch. The greasy streak of the cafeteria's meatloaf pairing with the heavy butter and salt smell of mashed potatoes. Warm tobacco and shoe polish. One of them was bleeding slightly. Under the stink of two competing blends of cheap aftershave, the tangy scent of cloves and oranges underlined with cocoa butter lotion. The last part meant...

"Good morning Terry," I rose from the bed and moved to the middle of the room "bringing lunch early? What's the occasion?"

"Doc moved up your appointment Ms. Hebert. He said something about needing the rest of the week off." Terry was his usual self. An immaculate set of nurses scrubs, stretched over his massive muscles, a small kind smile, and hands always moving along with whatever he was saying. They motioned to the guards on either side of him as he continued "So we're here interrupting your schedule. Hope you're not too busy."

I smiled back at him as I gathered up my books. "No. Just reading like always. Did Dr. Tarrare say why he needed the time off? I know he hasn't been feeling well." On one hand, I was interested and always ready to be out of the box I spent most of my time in. On the other hand, I couldn't shake the cold feeling that always came with that name.

Terry shook his head as I dropped my books in the metal drawer and stepped back a few paces. The one guard I recognized, Caldwell, pulled the drawer through and gathered them up while the new one watched with a confused look. He seemed uneasy and impatient, constantly shifting his weight. Caldwell slid the thick plastic tray into place and pushed the drawer back over to my side before heading off with Terry. Leaving me alone with the newbie. Hopefully it was more a sign of trust than an attempt at hazing.

I grabbed the plate and sat down on the toilet to start eating. The meatloaf and potatoes were accompanied with corn that had been boiled into flavorless blobs. I dug into those first to get them out of the way. A few spoonfuls in and I couldn't tell what was worse, the unfilling food or the pair of eyes drilling into me from across the reinforced glass.

"It's a bad habit to stare. You should watch that."

"What?" He bristled and straightened. "I'm supposed to watch *you*."

Great he's a touchy one, "I understand. Though, if you pay attention to the other workers around here you'll notice they watch without staring. They'll let their eyes roam a bit. It helps everyone feel a little more at ease. Not to mention keeping the more unstable patients from thinking you're singling them out." It was honest advice. Staring at someone long enough could irritate anyone. Plenty of people here would take exception to just about anything and that wouldn't help.

"Patients like you?"

I looked up at that. The stocky man stood firm with his chin jutting out. His feet were in an open stance and his hands had dropped to his sides. The effect was ruined by his wrists showing from the bad fit of the uniform he was wearing. With the light coming in from the hall I could see my reflection seemingly sitting next to him. Lanky and wiry, with curly black hair finally filling back out to shoulder length. My near six feet in height wasn't much to look at while hunched over cheap food on a metal toilet. Not exactly a threatening display. On the other hand my wide mouth had started to pull into a grimace, which didn't go well with my narrowed eyes. Not that eye contact went well for me in general anymore. Probably why this idiot was looking a little concerned.

"No. Not like me." Fuck it. This guy had already ruined what passed for lunch here with his rudeness. Letting off a little steam before my visit with Dr. Tarrare would give us something to talk about. And I was still hungry. "Dr. Eaton is very insistent that I'm to be considered 'unpredictable' rather than 'unstable'. She made a point of stressing it with Terry. I assume she did it in earshot of me to show how she was 'onto my game' as she put it later." Which was honestly more annoying for how obvious she was about it than anything.

"And what's the difference?" His lips twitched into a smirk.

"Quite a bit around here. My mother was an English professor, you know? She'd have torn into you for not acknowledging the 'colloquial terms' a place can build up." I paused to wolf down more of the food, "For example, here unstable means that a person is easily swayed. Plenty of people here are fighting with so much in their own heads, they can be tipped one way or another with even the smallest misplaced action. Like kicking a wounded leg out from

under someone." I grinned as I finished my last bite and stood. I watched the smirk fade before I went on, closing the distance between us, "Unpredictable means both that the person has a motive and that motive isn't known. You can't know what their goals are beyond them having one. Like an impostor in the ranks, when you know that they're *there* but not what they *want*." The fact that I slammed the drawer with the plate inside back to his end right as the gates started cycling back was the icing on the cake. His eyes danced down the hall and back to me.

Terry stepped into view a few seconds later pushing what looked like a heavily modified hand truck. Caldwell stepped forward to the drawer and replaced my plate with a thick bundle of canvas. I unfolded the straitjacket and put my arms through as I stepped into the middle of the room.

“Everything alright?” Terry asked as he swiped the key card to my cell, sensing the tension that had filled the hall. He’d always been kind but at the end of the day he was a professional. He kept an eye and ear out for anything that might upset the balance of things. It was one of the things I liked about him. He didn’t see his position as something to hold over you. He knew where the line was.

“Fine. Just passing along a little advice to your new coworker.” I swayed as Caldwell and the mentioned newcomer stepped forward in near unison and grabbed my shoulders. Caldwell was finished with the various buckles before his counterpart was even half done. He stepped back and covered Caldwell as he finished.

“We haven’t had any trouble for a while, Hebert. Is that going to change?” Caldwells voice was deep and mellow as he looked up at me. As he stood I brought my feet together with a careful slowness.

“No. Just wanted to know if I’d be seeing him around. But, uhm, he’s not quite used to things around here, I guess.”

He didn’t look convinced. As he stepped out of the cell I heard him mutter “Don’t let her rattle you, Monti” so at least I had a name now.

I heard the familiar rattle of metal as he came back in. With rote precision I stepped back as soon as it stopped. My foot landed a little higher than the floor and I let myself fall back into the incline of the ‘Get Clear’. A modified hand truck that carried an independent power source and grounding latches for my feet and the straps of my jacket. If I tried to break free of it, the first things I’d have to break would be the leads wrapped through the arm straps. That would flood the whole frame with a debilitating charge for at least 10 seconds. It was designed as a simple answer to the problems of Brute transport. In theory a guard would have ample time to administer an emergency tranquilizer or containment foam before anyone could break free. Nurse Dales had taken great pleasure in telling me that, in practice, the shock gave everyone time to ‘get clear’ before opening fire rather than try and grapple a seizing parahuman. I made a habit of keeping my hands raised slightly in the restraints as the leads were passed through to give myself some leeway rather than test it.

With that out of the way, I was paraded down the hall to the usual jeers and shouts of the worst of our ward. I let my eyes close and focused on what I could pick up around me. The

first and most obvious thing was the clove/orange/rubbing alcohol scent of Terry. He'd explained once on a night shift that he made his own deodorant and even sold some on the side when local supplies ran low. Past that was the standard mix of mop water and sweat, vomit and medications, all with an undercurrent of fear and depression. Eu de Asylum East. Revived in 1985 after a presidential amendment of the Community Mental Health Act and placed into the loving care of a mire of interlinked and inscrutable third party companies for the containment of mentally ill parahumans.

I let my memory fill in the details of our route minus all the doctors and attendants looking at the crazy being carted around. We moved from the freight elevator at the very back all the way across the fortified 'Special Cases' wing and towards the Administration Building. We were almost to the walkway that would take us across when I caught a whiff of something off. Old brick, scorched metal, tarry and eye watering.

"You're moving Elle today too?" I let my head fall back into a tilt rather than try and fully turn to face Terry.

"One day you're going to tell me how you do that," He chuckled and I could feel his head bob through the handles, "Go all 'Sherlock Holmes' while dozing off on a dolly. Yeah, she's getting shuffled around again. They're trying to set up some kind of … hmmm."

"Tell me they're not bunking her with Mimi." Sensing he didn't want to say too much I picked up the slack in the conversation, "There's no way that'll last more than a month."

"Don't be mean Ms Hebert," I only really put up with him calling me that because, somehow, when he said it it didn't call Mom to mind "You know you get along with Mimi just fine."

"Better than Elle. At least *she* has a sense of humor. But that's the problem. Elle would rather be anywhere but here. So she goes off in her head-"

"Same as you do whenever Dr. Eaton takes your books."

"Totally different. I just know how to keep myself entertained. Mimi is always ready to talk when she's on her meds and in a good place. It's going to drive Elle up a tree. Literally. She will make a horrible barbed wire tree and climb it."

There was a sharp inhale from behind me. "Yeah, that's part of the problem. They found that courier that went missing a few days ago."

"Ah. Is he …" I couldn't think of a good way to finish the question. The best option for someone who'd gotten lost in Elle's 'worlds' was exposure and dehydration. And that wasn't likely given the amount of broken glass and needles.

"Last I heard he got taken up to the Roxborough Memorial ICU. He was in pretty bad shape after two days. It didn't seem like they were holding out much hope. Just … collecting more of what they can on what it's like over there."

With that the rest of the trip was silent except for the squeaking of wheels and soles. Terry was hard to bring down, but something like that happening with one of the Asylums foremost

sources of anxiety would do it. It wasn't even that her power was that scary, even though it was, rather that Elle herself was just a kid. She just couldn't control the seep of her strange ability on her bad days. All of the ground level staff and most of the lucid patients couldn't help but see her as one part mascot and one part avatar of the Asylum. Simple and peaceful one moment, an absolute nightmare the next. She was quiet and kind on her good days. She never said much, she could bring the tone up in a room just by sitting in a corner and humming tunelessly. Just one more hurting kid in a building full of them. Then a bad day would come. She'd be screaming in that low monotonous way and everyone would be handed maps of what hallways needed prior warning if you went down them. All the while the higher ups poked and prodded. They noted the trend of bad days increasing and their worsening effects as data to be graphed and nothing more.

The pall followed us to the central hub of Asylum East. It was part of the original structure and sat in the middle of a sprawl of specialized wings and labs that had been built around it. Old Catholic construction meant to cure through the fear of God was topped with an extra three stories of brutally efficient office and administrative space. Footsteps stopped squeaking over linoleum and instead sent echoes ahead over cold stone. The HVAC system that had been wedged where it would fit filled the air with a low, moaning hum. The place taken as a whole was impersonal to the extreme. As if the building itself was weighing and judging those who did the same to us. The cold set in as my minders checked in with security.

The wait grated like always. The cold and the buzz. The same signing and witnessing on papers like I was a package being delivered. With the added treat of introducing Monti around more. The weird paradox of claustrophobia in an open room from being unable to move without the threat of electrocution and worse. All on top of the fact that I was still hungry. I kept my eyes closed and tried to steady my breathing. I could almost smell salt and motor oil when I felt hands settle on the grips behind me. With everyone finished we passed through into the main wing with a more respectable 'beep' and the hiss of sliding glass.

The arrhythmic beat of their footsteps bounced around me on our way deeper.

Chapter End Notes

So here it is! My first work. I'm already regretting everything, the imposter syndrome is running wild, but if I double check the draft one more time I'll dissolve into a pile of punctuation and imagined blue and red squiggles.

So if you'd leave your comments below I'd really appreciate it! Don't worry about the moderation, I'm not looking to nerf any criticism. There's just a few things I'm looking to keep out of there and that's the best way to do it.

Join us at the Gaylor Convention Center Discord server: https://discord.gg/ZCbE58Ym

Slow Cooked Garlic Kalua Pork:

1 4-6 pound pork shoulder or Boston butt roast
1 Tablespoon liquid smoke
2-3 teaspoons salt
1 clove garlic
1/2 pack bacon
1 pack Hawaiian rolls per person served

1. Rinse and pat the pork shoulder dry with paper towel, do not trim off excess fat and place in the slow cooker.

2. Pierce all over with a fork, pour the liquid smoke evenly over the roast and sprinkle liberally with the sea salt.

3. Additionally pierce a deep spot for each bulb of de-skinned garlic, wedge garlic inside.

4. Place pork on bed of bacon covering the bottom of the slow cooker, set the time for eight to twelve hours on LOW.

5. Check at about eight hours for doneness. If not done let go the full 12 hours, checking every hour.

6. Remove around 2 cups of liquid (500ml) and set aside. This should be most of the cooking liquid removed. Shred the pork with forks and then add some of the liquid back in to keep the pork from drying out. You might not add all the liquid back in, save it for storing the pork if there are leftovers.

7. Remove pork, shred while removing garlic. Set garlic aside.

8. Cut a 2x2 section of Hawaiian rolls into a bun. Smear top with cooked garlic. Add pork and serve.

Prep Work 1.2

Chapter Notes

Taylor talks things out in therapy and plays a game

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Finally we made it to Dr. Tarrare's office. The ghostly drone was replaced by the sweet slow melody of Bach's Goldberg Variations Aria. The walls were mostly hidden behind oak bookcases, filled with a library that ranged every topic I could imagine. On certain shelves there were collections of artwork ranging from sketches and portraits, studies of anatomy, to prints and diagrams of architecture. All of it lit with recessed lights that drew the eye to each item individually. The echoing of footsteps stopped as we crossed over onto the dark black and gray rugs that lined most of the floor with the exception of a reinforced concrete block that rose from the middle. The effect was almost palatial. An oasis of culture after the grim trip here, that never failed to impress. Just as always, I felt that awe dim just a bit when I saw the doctor.

He sat like a spider in his web. Past eighty, though he'd never admit just how far, he was lean and what little muscle showed was wiry. Despite his sharp cheeks and square jaw what stood out in his expression was how little there was. His hairline had receded into a simple slicked back and thin gray style leaving behind sparse flat eyebrows. His wide mouth never seemed to betray more than mild amusement or irritation. He had heavily lidded, mourners eyes that only occasionally showed a glimpse of dark humor. Though I think I got to see it more than most.

He strained a bit as he rose from behind his desk. Despite leaning more heavily on his cane lately, he still strode around the workspace to sit confidently in the armchair across from the block. With a slight grunt he turned and pulled a wood board and pair of bowls from behind him to set on the low table in front of him.

"It is good to see you again Taylor. I must apologize for bringing you in early. I trust that my need to reschedule didn't inconvenience you?" His voice was low and even, the slightly European accent mixed with a faint rasp.

“No. I’ve been here long enough that any change to the routine is almost exciting.” I didn’t let any edge creep into my voice as I waited for Terry to tilt the Get Clear to stand. As soon as my feet were free I stepped off and sat down on the block. Caldwell immediately started walking Monti through the anchors at either side as I continued. “Though I’m not looking forward to the longer wait until the next session. Are you going to be away for Christmas?”

“Though I had planned to host a dinner for some acquaintances, all but one have had to reschedule after Behemoths attack on Jolon. So it will be a more intimate affair than I’d originally planned. I am also taking time away to see to a medical concern. Other than that I will be free to continue your treatment over the winter holidays.” The glimmer of humor surfaced in his gaze for a moment, “As for tedium, it is important to become accustomed to monotony if you are to reenter society in the future.”

He lied so easily I almost believed it . *Whatever you have planned for me, it’s not going to be tedious.*

“That’s true. But outside I’d have more options. Here if I want to stretch my legs I have to wait for Terry to take me to the Yard for walkies.” That got a chuckle from behind me as Caldwell tugged slightly on my restraints to make sure everything was fastened. His checks driving my point home wasn’t lost on the doctor as I saw the corner of his mouth twitch upwards slightly. “And I’ve gone through everything in the Asylums library that isn’t simple self help books. I’m lucky you’re willing to lend out what you brought here.”

The old man nodded and busied himself with laying out the grid marked board on the table in between the two pots with a bit of ceremony while everyone else left. “I am always happy to help broaden a growing minds horizons. I believe it to be a part of the responsible practice of psychiatry. Exercise and a good diet is as important mentally as it is physically.” He leveraged himself onto his feet with his cane and moved to one of the cabinets under a bookcase, “I assume you have already had lunch brought to you? Are you still hungry?” He pulled out a silvery foil lunch box and walked back to the table.

“Yes. Please.” I couldn’t help but track the tin cake pan that was pulled out as he set it in front of me. The doctor waited while I rolled my sleeves over my hands after he unzipped them. I didn’t have much range with my elbows leashed to the block but it was enough to reach the board and eat if I ducked into it. I pulled back the foil covering the top and froze at the sight of an expanse of perfectly browned cheese. The smell of a familiar blend of herbs, garlic, and tomato. I must’ve been staring for minutes before he spoke and shook me out of my frozen state.

“Is there a problem Taylor?”

“This is my mothers recipe, isn’t it?.” I asked quietly. There was too much running through my mind to put any inflection to the statement.

“Yes,” his raised brow lowered, “I had considered fully adjusting the recipe, it calls for too much garlic for my tastes, but I thought you would appreciate it unaltered.”

I looked at the man who’d help sentence me here, who had spent the last year ‘treating’ me, who’d taught me so much and couldn’t think of anything to say but a murmured “Thank you.” before cutting in and taking the biggest bite I could.

It wasn’t exact. The sauce was different and he’d cooked the noodles properly. But it was enough. I had to stop myself from nearly choking on the nostalgia. I could remember helping Mom layer the ingredients while trying to add more cheese at every step. Having to rotate it every now and then to make up for the oven's wonky heating coil. My dad's false despair and pleading at having ‘stinky breath cake’ again. I was almost through filling the pit in my stomach before the question came to me.

“Does this mean you found him?”

“Your father? No. Unfortunately, he seems determined to remain unfound. About a month ago the state of Massachusetts decided that it would no longer be keeping your belongings as evidence. It contacted the Asylum as your primary care provider. I was informed and paid to have it inventoried. I saved what I could, excepting the furniture, and left it safe with a friend.”

“A friend?”

“Dean Kolyck.” He motioned to his desk “A discreet man, with plenty of room for storage. I left his information in a red file in the bottom left drawer of my desk. Now if you are finished, we should begin. We have much to discuss before you leave here today.”

Despite that we took a moment to set up the game. Dr. Tarrare held out two hands and choosing left had me playing black. He pushed the corresponding bowl towards me and we played for a few minutes in silence. After a few turns I had to take a moment and look over the board. His pieces were scattered and didn’t seem to have any cohesion to them. Sensing I needed to be the one to broach the topic I paused on my turn.

“Is there a point to this?”

“That is a very broad question Taylor.” He said dryly, “Many have spent their entire lives pursuing an answer. Unless you had something more specific in mind?”

“You’ve never thrown a game even when you were teaching me.’ I motioned to the board where his pieces were scattered. White had technically taken territory but it was in small chaotic clumps with no pattern to them. “So what are you trying to say?”

“White is an interesting color. In terms of the light spectrum it is usually considered to be every color present at once. With pigments it is the exact opposite, an absence of any other

color.” I waited through the seeming digression. The doctor had stopped his turn, considering the board while slowly walking a small white stone across the six fingers of his left hand. “Perhaps you should consider this aspect in terms of your opposition.”

“I don’t think that color theory has much application in Go doctor.” I couldn’t help needling.

“When you leave this place you will have plenty of opposition to contend with. Most of it will come from preconceptions surrounding how you arrived here and your conduct once confined. You will need to consider the spectrum of opinions about you if you hope to have a productive future.”

“Am I likely to get out any time soon?” I couldn't hope. Not yet. The best chance for my case to be reevaluated was when I turned eighteen. I knew that.

“It is unlikely that anyone besides myself will advocate for your release anytime soon. Additionally, Dr. Eaton has made it clear to the staff that she intends to push forward a diagnosis of either malignant narcissism or psychopathy.” His distaste was clear, “Despite the latter term being out of use in clinical circles for nearly fifty years. I suspect she understands the public's reaction to the term better than the psychiatric.”

I told myself that it wasn’t hope that died in my chest. Just the space I’d foolishly cleared out for it caving in. But, if it felt the same did it really matter? Dr. Eaton was the head of the Asylum and guarded her position jealously. Whatever anyone said about her as a doctor no one denied that she played the administrative and political game better than most. If she wanted me here I wouldn’t be able to fight it. But I let the digression play on.

“So Dr. Eaton is still holding a grudge. I’ve known that for a while now. She can’t stand me and the feeling is mutual. The only time she ever came to see me in person was when I first arrived.” I leveled a glare across the board. Maybe I set my stone down a bit too forcefully. I felt it was warranted. “She spent the entire time asking the worst questions and implying

things about Danny. It was like she was pawing through my life for the worst interpretations she could find."

"She is a dedicated woman but she has little regard for the delicacy of our profession. I've met her type before. She favors a direct and thorough approach. I imagine with someone more skilled it would be a decisive, if impersonal, form of treatment. Unfortunately with Dr. Eaton it comes off as a freshman fumbling at a jockstrap." He considered for a moment. "It carries on to her oversight of the Asylum I'm afraid. It has recently come to light that our security was made in part by the Dragonslayers. No doubt that it was a decision made with efficacy and frugality in mind. But there was a steep cost anyway. Not only has it attracted the attention of legal authorities and others, it has understandably lowered her regard with many. Tell me Taylor, if you were to leave here today how do you think you would be regarded?"

"I think … some people would be afraid. But most people wouldn't know anything so they wouldn't care. Nothing to color their perception of me." I answered distractedly. I had no idea about the security. It made sense to a degree, the group was known to be incredibly talented with all sorts of security systems. But that was because they were a mercenary group of villains constantly chasing the best Tinker on earth.

"I would agree with the first part. It is an unfortunate fact that many will not understand your abilities or your need to use them. In addition, your circumstances do grant you some measure of anonymity." He caught my eyes as steel entered his. "However, the unknown has been called humanity's oldest fear. It is a primal thing. When people have nothing certain to fit into their understanding, they will allow their perception to be colored by all they can imagine instead. I saw that you have met Mr. Monti already. How did your initial meeting go?"

There was really only one way to answer that.

"Badly. He didn't take the advice I gave him well. Then I ... prodded him after he implied I was crazy."

“You are currently a patient housed in an asylum, Taylor.”

I glared at him and got nothing back but passive regard. Dr. Tarrare had the ability to sit almost completely motionless while he waited. He merely existed in his three piece suit, legs crossed and the point he was making hanging in the air. Combined with his natural poker face it was infuriating. I held his gaze for a moment while I shivered as the cold seeped into my legs from the uncushioned cement. Finally I turned to the board.

“I was sentenced here out of convenience doctor. With everything that's happened since I’m not likely to be let go anytime soon either.”

“So his preconceptions regarding your circumstances colored his actions. I’m sure your observations did not help endear him to you either.” That gleam had come back to his eyes, “I’m simply pointing out that you will have to be aware of not only your opponents, but the ideas and biases that drive them. By acknowledging them you can then make use of them.”

“And how do you think I should make use of them?”

Whatever he was about to say was cut off by an alarm ringing through the facility. It was a frantic reverberating klaxon that trailed off to an oscillating whine before clicking back in a loop. I heard some sort of lock *clunk* into place on the door. The air shifted slightly, becoming a bit warmer and bringing in the smell of of the pines outside as the air systems purged anything in the building. All the while the doctor sat leaned back with the first full smile I’d seen from him.

“I believe it is time to discuss your desire for freedom in more detail Taylor,” He raised his voice only enough to be heard over the alarm and pulled himself up from the chair. “Unless, of course, you’ve decided to avail yourself to the states hospitality indefinitely?”

“ *You did this!?”* I couldn’t keep a slight squeak from my voice. What had he done and how? And what and how much would I have to do to make good on this chance? But at the same time … freedom. After endless months of staring at either flat concrete or the fenced in Yard.

“Not quite Taylor. I merely kept a careful watch on circumstances around the facility. We discussed the system that Dr. Eaton is currently receiving so much attention for? I believe this to be the result of less than legal inquiry into its details.” He stepped back around his desk with a few files in hand and set them on the table before fixing me with a level assessing look. “Do you recall what we’ve talked about on the nature of opportunity?”

“They can either be made or found. Both require observation, but the latter takes patience where the former takes action” Saying it clicked a few pieces together in my mind and I couldn’t help but laugh, “Monti! The new guard!” His eyebrow quirked upwards at my exclamation, “When I said I ‘prodded’ him I meant I implied he was hiding something. I might’ve spooked him into acting early.” I was snapped from my reflection when he placed both his hands on my shoulders in a firm grip and looked down with fondness.

“So you managed to further this opportunity all on your own. Even if it was by chance, I congratulate you. I will watch your career with great interest Taylor. I have no doubt you’ll make me proud.”

My breath caught at the compliment from the monster who’d helped me so much. I sat frozen as the doctor moved to my side, the straps being loosened seemed to be happening to someone else. The idea of being free from this place after so long, the surprise of it coming from nowhere, and the sudden wealth of options ahead of me left my thoughts in disarray. What was the best way to get out of the Asylum? Where would I go once I got out? How would I get there?

The questions seemed to fall away with the heavy canvas of the straitjacket. I stood and stretched out to my near six feet, simply luxuriating in the feeling of it. I wasn’t in my cell and free to move for the first time in over a year. I was suddenly struck with the urge to touch

everything in the office. To just *feel* the spines of the books or the bumps and ridges of the various busts and mementos. I restrained myself to just pulling down one of the books I'd had my eye on since I was first carted in to see Dr Tarrare. A massive volume so dark green it was almost black. The front cover was engraved to look like a brick oven with three chickens on rotisseries cooking over an open fire. The flames were embossed with an eye-catching gold foil. The title was printed in matching gold foil, *Larousse Gastronomique.* Over thirteen thousand pages of culinary knowledge. While Dr. Tarrare busied himself making calls to the front desk and security for check in, I sat back down on the block and ran my hands over the cover.

I let my eyes drift upwards and scan the room. I didn't have much time left here and an idea slowly filtered into my mind. I pushed away the nervous excitement that had been building in my chest and took a deep breath through my nose.

Wood polish and dust. Old stone, clay, and parchment. Faux lemon from the carpet cleaner. The oily hazel scent of Tarrare's aftershave soaking in beneath it all.

I let the breath out slowly as I closed my eyes and focused on the smells I carried within me. The hot tang of exhaust and asphalt baked under the sun. The metallic edge of rust from shipping containers. Wet wood and algae. I followed them deeper and deeper into my mind. Using them to pull me to the familiar territory of the Dockworkers Association grounds I kept there.

The technique was called *the Method of Loci* or a *memory journey.* Tarrare refereed to his as a 'mind palace' but I thought that was too high brow for the simple, honest place I built. The idea was centered around constructing a copy of a familiar place in your mind and tying parts of it to memories. The doctor had taught it to me as a way to calm myself and escape the worst of the asylum. So I had slowly pieced together the DWA campus in my head. I made my way back there now to do some renovations.

I 'opened' my eyes looking up at a cheaply plastered ceiling. I took a moment to breathe deep, savoring the smells of brine and chemicals that filled the air. My head rested comfortably against the rough upholstery of the cheap chairs that Dad had picked up at an estate sale. I looked around at the old office. It was full of all the good I remembered of him.

Pictures of Mom and Dad together. At their wedding, in college, at parties with friends. Scraps of wiring and wood shavings littered the desk. He never threw away anything if he could help it, relying on his hands and hard earned experience to bring things back to working order. I turned and left the room slowly filling with dust. I lingered for just a second, taking in the quiet of the waves against the docks and the breeze blowing in through the open window. The world outside my head came through from a distance. Like listening to a conversation through a rainstorm.

"Yes, this is Dr. Tarrare checking in. Yes Ms Nevets I am just fine. No sign of trouble and my patient is behaving herself admirably."

I stood and made my way out of my fathers office. Despite all he did for and all he was to the Dockworkers Association he'd kept the first office that he'd been given. A small side room on the second floor with a window overlooking a stretch of the parking lot. 'I know where everything's at and the guys don't need to lug it all upstairs just because I got new business cards' he'd said.

"I'm sure Marie. Seven-seven Victor; Alfa Two-two."

I crossed in front of a desk that was supposed to be for a secretary, though I'd never seen one there. There was never enough to afford it. Instead it was covered in picture frames. One showed my Mom and Dad at the PRT Headquarters with my tiny 7 year old self sandwiched between them. My grin so wide it showed nearly all of my then 31 teeth. I'd been so happy to just be in the building where Miss Militia worked. Another was of my mother teaching her class, severe and serious as she broke down the syllabus and her plans for the year. She wasn't unfair but she always made her expectations clear to the students right from the start. I picked up one of the frames laying face down. I knew it would hurt but I needed it then. Something to balance me, remind me that things could change for better *and* worse. Emma and I stared out, 12 years old and sheepishly grinning. In the background was a plastic kiddie pool, filled to the brim with murky water, random plant life, and chunks of styrofoam. The Frog Farm. Our answer to learning about all the predators that ate frogs in science class. I sighed and moved on, muttering darkly to distract myself from my stinging eyes.

“Do you have any information on what the cause for the alarm is? Not a problem. I am sure we will know soon enough.”

Old linoleum crackled underfoot as I moved down the hallway. I turned as I came to a door that used to belong to one of my dads old coworkers. He’d been around when I was young and then one day … he wasn’t. “Mr Jackson spent too long in his head” was all my dad would say when I asked him where he’d gone. *A place for too many thoughts and too much darkness*. I shook away the unpleasant memory and opened the door to a familiar opulent office.

“Thank you again Marie. Do not worry and be safe. Yes, I will. Good bye.”

I went to the bookcases first. They were filled with everything I’d learned here. The books I’d read while stuck in my cell, but also the lessons learned from dealing with doctors, guards, and the other patients. Sticky notes rose from a few of the books like flags. Small reminders and warnings about the various people I had to look out for. I began tuck them away in the lower cabinets. I wouldn’t need them on hand anymore but it never hurt to keep them in mind. I kept the scrapbooks of the few group sessions I’d been allowed to attend as well as last Christmas, when everyone had been cautiously optimistic about the new girl fresh from solitary.

“Mr Valentine. No. No problems. How long can we expect the lock down to last?”

I kept what I remembered from Terry where it was. The long nights of conversations and the mental notes on aroma profiles from his experiments. I stood back and looked over the displays on the shelves. A detailed blueprint of a bank, done in finger paints by Keelee in Art Therapy. On the shelf opposite was the thick beige plastic of a lunch tray. There were still the remnant streaks of gravy in one of the corners. In the center was a mouthful of flesh, glistening wetly in a pool of blood. I felt my heart pounding as I stared. The gnawing edge of hunger mixed with a greasy sick feeling in my stomach. I fought back the desire to hide the tray. To hide this evidence, even from myself. That’s why I had to keep it out.

“I see. That does complicate things.”

I tore my eyes away and focused on the space I’d cleared. I focused on the cover of the *Larousse.* I ran my hand over the pebbled surface and tied the newness of the feeling to the lightness in my chest. I let myself savor the feeling for a moment and then set the book on a simple stand in the space I’d cleared. I might not be here for much longer, but this moment of freedom I’d captured would stay clear in my memory.

“I will keep an eye out for any changes to the area. Thank you Mr Valentine.”

I let the dim copy of the room fade around me and looked up at Dr. Tarrare hanging up the phone. He straightened a bit and turned to me.

“Well Taylor, as certain as I am that you would like to leave immediately, I would ask that you indulge me for a few minutes longer. After all we have a game to finish.” He settled himself in the armchair.

I could’ve just left.

“Alright. You had just said something about biases and my ‘opponents’ before we were interrupted. Who do you mean by that?” I picked another stone from the bowl by my side and placed it to start stretching in between the territories he’d already consolidated. I relished the feeling of just being able to play without tugging against straps and anchors.

“There are some I would single out but on the whole you must acknowledge that your impending escape will draw attention, little of it good. You will be hunted. And foremost among those hunters,” he leaned forward to place a stone leading off the largest clump, “will be the PRT and Protectorate. While you have no abilities recorded other than your strength and physical alterations it is known that you are a parahuman. And while it has been easier to assign me the blame for your time here we both know it was enforced by a higher authority than myself.”

I could've sworn he looked a little sad at the idea. Though what part of it I'd never be able to guess. I simply nodded and played on. I had already guessed that the PRT wouldn't take things lying down. Hopefully I could fade into the background. I didn't want to fight Heroes despite how useless or corrupt they'd turned out to be.

"I will acknowledge the foolishness of trying to teach the daughter of an English professor the meanings behind the phrase 'you can't go home again' but it holds true. Brockton Bay is still very much in a state of controlled chaos. The various factions still war against each other constantly without the stabilizing influence of Marquis." Dr. Tarrare had told me once that the original reason he had come to Brockton was to research Marquis. The man fascinated him and he'd once mentioned an 'inconsistency' about him he hadn't been able to work out. "Tell me, when you look at the board, what is it that you see?"

I leaned over the board and studied what had been played so far. The only word for the doctor's territory was entrenched. Three irregular blobs in an almost heart like shape with thick doubled lines of stones. They were clustered in the upper right corner of the board from my side and nearly surrounded by my territory. There was something about the shape that tugged at my memory but I pushed it aside for the time being.

"You've locked down this corner, but it's overdone. There's no way to expand. At least not the way you've been playing."

"Imagine for a moment that I am contending with dissent in the ranks" He placed another stone, bolstering the lines between the blobs "That these pieces are only black and white from your perspective."

"So for you, these are three seperate groups?" My brow furrowed as I stared down, "Then you're balancing things well for now, I guess." I set another stone to start encroaching on the outside of the cluster.

“And I’ll be focused on keeping that balance. Whether it means building my walls,” Finally he started moving against me, his next placing a stone to intercept me. “or getting more pieces.”

“And how would you do that?”

“You may find much in Brockton Bay to be the same Taylor. However, by the nature of your abilities and experiences you have been changed. The gangs that once represented an ever present threat are now your peers. They will either attempt to control or eliminate you depending on their disposition.”

“So I’ll have to keep my head down,” The idea itched at me. To get free only to have to keep to the shadows didn’t seem right, “or make it clear I’m not interested.”

“A delicate balance for you as well then. You have the advantages we discussed, but also much to contend with.” He placed the lid on his bowl, surrendering the match with a stone still in hand. He placed it a middling distance into my territory, “I would advise you to consider your options thoroughly with regards to keeping that balance at first. Once it is disturbed, the game will change drastically.”

“I’ll keep it in mind. But I think it’s time for me to go.” I barely stopped myself from jumping to my feet and rose to collect the files he’d set aside for me. As I did, the alarm gave out with a warble. It was definitely time to get going. I looked down to see a map of my destination “Thank you Doctor. For today and for everything else. I hope I never have to see you again.”

“You may not have to Taylor, but I would hope you might accept a visitor in the future. The door override code is 10-15-19-52.”

I strode across the room and punched the code into the small pad next to the door.

Nothing happened.

Looking down at the keypad I could see its screen was blank. Whatever lights were supposed to illuminate the numbers weren't working. I felt an itch crawl up my spine. I could see tiny fractures around the display.

"Doctor, is your phone working?"

There were the sounds of shuffling, then a flat murmured "No."

I quickly walked over to his desk and pressed the power button on his computer. Nothing.

I could've just left.

But I hadn't. And while I'd waited something had caused every complex electronic in the room to fail.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the delay in updates, they'll be bi-weekly until I'm finished moving/unpacking.

If you'd leave your comments below I'd really appreciate it!

Join us at the Gaylor Convention Center Discord server: https://discord.gg/ZCbE58Ym

Roast Pork tenderloin with Cherry Cranberry Glaze

2 whole pork tenderloins
Cherry Juice
1/4 cup brown sugar
4 tsp cornstarch
1/2 cup dried cranberries
5 oz dried cherries w/ 1 cup juice or 16 oz can unsweetened tart cherries
1 tsp yellow mustard

Instructions:

Glaze:

If using canned cherries, drain and reserve the juice. Mix cornstarch with 2 Tbsp juice. In a small saucepan combine this mixture with 1 cup cherry juice, cherries, cranberries, and brown sugar. Heat and stir until this boils and thickens. Remove from heat, let cool slightly and add mustard.

1. Heat oven to 375

2. Season pork tenderloins with salt and pepper.

3. Roast in shallow roasting pan for 20-25 minutes

4. Pour glaze over tenderloins during last 10 minutes of roasting time.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!